

## **British “masters of the field”: The disaster at Brandywine**

Posted on [September 12, 2016](#) on *Finding the Maryland 400*



*Illustration of the Battle of Brandywine, drawn by cartographer, engraver and illustrator Johann Martin Will (1727-1806) in 1777. Image is courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

On the night of September 10, 1777, many of the soldiers and commanding officers of the Continental Army sat around their campfires and listened to an ominous sermon that would predict the events of the following day. Chaplain Jeremias (or Joab) Trout [declared](#) that God was on their side and that

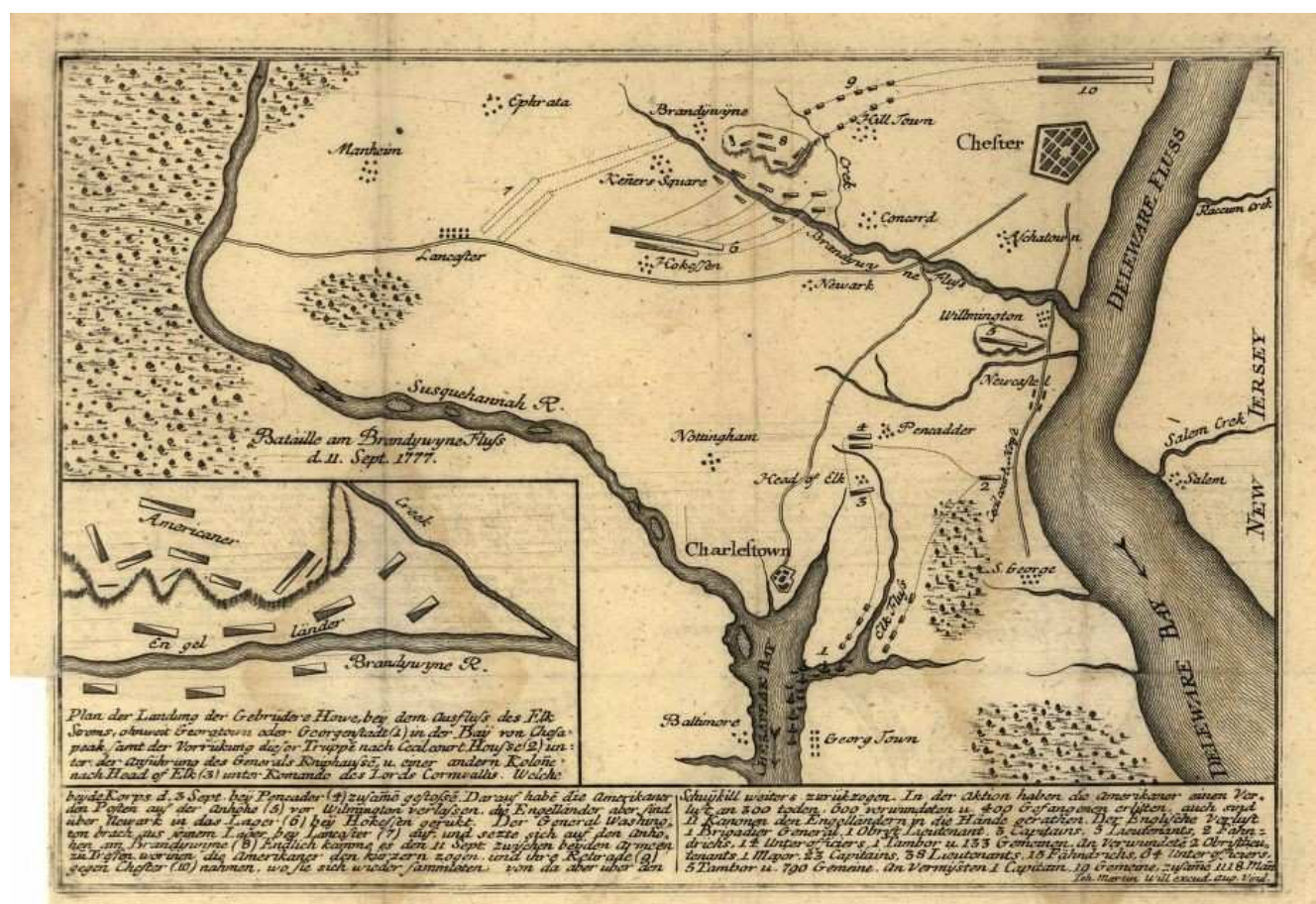
“we have met this evening perhaps for the last time...alike we have endured the cold and hunger, the contumely of the internal foe and the courage of foreign oppression...the sunlight...tomorrow...will glimmer on scenes of blood...Tomorrow morning we will go forth to battle...Many of us may fall tomorrow.” [1]

The following day, the Continentals would be badly defeated by the British and “scenes of blood” would indeed appear on the ground near Brandywine Creek.

In the previous month, a British flotilla consisting of 28 ships, loaded with over 12,000 troops, had sailed up the Chesapeake Bay. [2] They disembarked at the Head of Elk (now [Elkton, Maryland](#)) in July, under the command of Sir [William Howe](#), and had one objective: to attack the American capital of Philadelphia. [3] Howe had planned to form a united front with [John Burgoyne](#), but bad communication made this impossible. [4] At the same time, Burgoyne was preoccupied with fighting

the Continental Army [in Saratoga](#), where he ultimately surrendered later in the fall. With Howe's redcoats, light dragoons, grenadiers, and artillerymen were Hessian soldiers fighting for the Crown. [5]

Opposing these forces were two sections of the Continental Army. The first was the main body of Continentals led by George Washington, consisting of light infantry, artillery, ordinary foot-soldiers, and militia from Pennsylvania and Maryland. The second was the Continental right wing commanded by [John Sullivan](#), which consisted of infantry from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, and Maryland. The latter was led by [William Smallwood](#) and included the First Maryland Regiment. Other Marylanders who participated in the battle included [Walter Brooke Cox](#), [Joseph Marbury](#), [Daniel Rankins](#), [Samuel Hamilton](#), [John Toomy](#), [John Brady](#), and [Francis Reveley](#). While the British were nearby, the 15,000-man Continental Army fortified itself at [Chadd's Ford](#), sitting on [Brandywine Creek](#) in order to defend Philadelphia from British attack. [6]



A map by Johann Martin Will in early 1777, in the same set as the illustration of the battle at the beginning of this post, which shows British and Continental troop movements during the Battle of Brandywine.

The morning of September 11 was warm, still, and quiet in the Continental Army camp on the green and sloping area [behind Brandywine Creek](#). [7] Civilians from surrounding towns who were favoring the Crown, the revolutionary cause, or were neutral watched the events that were about to unfold. [8]



Suddenly, at 8:00, the British, on the other side of the creek, began to bombard the Continental positions facing the creek complimented by Hessians firing their muskets. [9] However, these attacks were never meant as a direct assault on Continental lines. [10] Instead, the British wanted to cross the creek, which had few bridges, including one unguarded bridge called [Jeffries' Ford](#) on Great Valley Road. As Howe engaged in a flanking maneuver, which he had used at the Battle of Brooklyn, the Marylanders would again find themselves on the front lines.

As the British continued their diversionary frontal attack on the Continental lines, thousands of them moved across the unguarded bridge that carried Great Valley Road over Brandywine Creek. Washington received reports about this British movement throughout the day but since these messages were inconsistent, he did not act on them until later. [11] At that point, he sent Sullivan's wing, including Marylanders, to push back the advancing British flank. [12]

These Marylanders encountered seasoned Hessian troops who, when joined by British guards and grenadiers, attacked the Marylanders. Due to the precise and constant fire from Hessians and a British infantry charge with bayonets, the Marylanders fled in panic. [13] Lieutenant [William Beatty](#) of the Second Maryland Regiment, who would perish in the [Battle of Hobkirk's Hill](#), recounted this attack:

“...[in] the Middle of this Afternoon...a strong Body of the Enemy had Cross'd above our Army and were in full march to out-flank us; this Obliged our Right wing to Change their front...before this could be fully [executed]...the Enemy Appeared and made a very Brisk Attack which put the whole of our Right Wing to flight...this was not done without some Considerable loss on their side, as of the Right wing behaved Gallantly...the Attack was made on the Right, the British...made the fire...on all Quarters.” [14]

As a Marylanders endured a “severe cannonade” from the British, the main body of the Continental Army was in trouble. [15] Joseph Armstrong of Pennsylvania, a private in a Pennsylvania militia unit, described retreating after the British had crossed Brandywine Creek, and moved back even further, at 5:00, for eight or nine miles, with the British in hot pursuit. [16]

Despite the “heavy and well supported fire of small arms and artillery,” the Continentals could not stop the British and Hessian troops, who ultimately pushed the Americans into the nearby woods. [17] The British soldiers, exhausted and wearing wool, were able to push back the Continentals at 5:30 on that hot day. [18] As Washington would admit in his apologetic letter to the President of the Continental Congress, [John Hancock](#), “...in this days engagement we have been obliged to leave the enemy masters of the field.” [19]

As the smoke cleared, the carnage was evident. Numerous Continentals were wounded, along with French military men such as the [Marquis de Lafayette](#). [20] Despite Washington's claim that “our loss of men is not...very considerable...[and] much less than the enemys,” about 200-300 were killed and 400 taken prisoner. [21] This would confirm Lieutenant Beatty's claim that Continental losses included eight artillery pieces, “500 men killed, wounded and prisoners.” [22] In contrast, on the British side, fewer than a hundred were killed while as many as 500 were wounded. [23] Beatty's assessment was that the British loss was “considerable” due to a “great deal of very heavy firing.” [24] Still, as victors, the British slept on the battlefield that night.

Not long after, the British engaged in a feint attack to draw away the Continental Army from Philadelphia and marched into the city without firing a shot, occupying it for the next ten months. [25] In the meantime, Congress fled to [York, Pennsylvania](#), where it stayed until Philadelphia could be re-occupied in late June 1778.

In the months after the battle, the Continental Army chose who would be punished for the defeat. This went beyond John Adams's response to the news of the battle: "...Is Philadelphia to be lost? If lost, is the cause lost? No—The cause is not lost but may be hurt." [26] While Washington accepted no blame for the defeat, others were court-martialed. [27]

One man was strongly accused for the defeat: John Sullivan. While some, such as [Charles Pickney](#), praised Sullivan for his "calmness and bravery" during the battle, a sentiment that numerous Maryland officers agreed with, others disagreed. [28] A member of Congress from North Carolina, [Thomas Burke](#), claimed that Sullivan engaged in "evil conduct" leading to misfortune, and that Sullivan was "void of judgment and foresight." [29] He said this as he attempted to remove Sullivan from his commanding position. Since Sullivan's division mostly fled the battleground, even as some resisted British advances, and former Quaker [Nathaniel Greene](#) led a slow retreat, the blame of Sullivan is not a surprise. [30] Burke's effort did not succeed since Maryland officers and soldiers admired Sullivan for his aggressive actions and bravery, winning him support. [31]

Another officer accused of misdeeds was a Marylander named [William Courts](#), a veteran of the Battle of Brooklyn. He was accused of "cowardice at the Battle of Brandywine" and for talking to Major [Peter Adams](#) of the 7th Maryland Regiment with "impertinent, and abusive language" when Adams questioned Courts' battlefield conduct. [32] Courts was ultimately acquitted, though he left the Army shortly afterwards. However, his case indicates that the Continental Army was looking for scapegoats for the defeat.

The rest of the remaining Continental Army marched off in the cover of darkness, preventing a battle the following day. They camped at [Chester](#), on the other side of the [Schuylkill River](#), where they stayed throughout late September. [33] Twenty-four days after the battle on the Brandywine, the Continental Army attacked the British camp at [Germantown](#) but foggy conditions led to friendly fire, annulling any chance for victory. [34] While it was a defeat, the Battle of Germantown served the revolutionary cause by raising hopes for the United States in the minds of European nobility. [35] It may have also convinced Howe to resign from the British Army, as commander of British forces in North America, later that month.

In the following months, the Continental Army continued to fight around Philadelphia and New Jersey. After the battle at Germantown, the British laid [siege to Fort Mifflin](#) on [Mud Island](#) for over a month. They also engaged in an intensified siege on Fort Mercer at [Red Bank](#), leading to its surrender in late October. In an attempt to assist Continental forces, a detachment of Maryland volunteers under Lieutenant Colonel [Samuel Smith](#) were sent to fight in the battle at Fort Mifflin. [36] By November, the Continentals abandoned Fort Mifflin and retired to Valley Forge. Still, this hard-fought defense of the Fort denied the British use of the Delaware River, foiling their plans to further defeat Continental forces.

As the war went on, the First Maryland Regiment would fight in the northern colonies until 1780 in battles at [Monmouth](#) (1778) and [Stony Point](#) (1779) before moving to the Southern states as part of Greene's southern campaign. [37] They would come face-to-face with formidable British forces again in battles at [Camden](#) (1780), [Cowpens](#) (1781), [Guilford Courthouse](#) (1781), and [Eutaw Springs](#) (1781). In the end, what the Scottish economist Adam Smith wrote in 1776 held true in the Battle of Brandywine and until the end of the war: that Americans would not voluntarily agree with British imperial control and would die to free themselves from such control. [38]

– *Burkely Hermann, Maryland Society of the Sons of American Revolution Research Fellow, 2016.*

---

## Notes

[1] *Collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Vol. 1 (Merrehew & Thompson, 1853), 70-72; Lydia Minturn Post, *Personal Recollections of the American Revolution: A Private Journal* (ed. Sidney Barclay, New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 207-218; Virginia Biography, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography* Vol. V (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1915), 658. Courtesy of Ancestry.com; George F. Scheer, and Hugh F. Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats: The American Revolution Through the Eyes of Those who Fought and Lived It* (New York: De Capo Press, 1957, reprint in 1987), 234. Trout, who was also a Reverend, would not survive the battle. While some records reprint his name as "Joab Traut," other sources indicate that his first name was actually Jeremias and that his last name is sometimes spelled Trout.

[2] Andrew O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Command During the Revolutionary War and the Preservation of the Empire* (London: One World Publications, 2013), 254; Ferling, 177; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 87; "A Further Extract from the Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq; by a Committee of the British House of Commons," *Maryland Journal*, December 7, 1779, Baltimore, Vol. VI, issue 324, page 1.

[3] Washington thrown back at Brandywine, *Chronicle of America* (ed. Daniel Clifton, Mount Kisco, NY: Chronicle Publications, 1988), 163; "The Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq; before the House of Commons," *Maryland Journal*, November 23, 1779, Baltimore, Vol. VI, issue 322, page 1. Joseph Galloway, a former member of the Continental Congress who later became favorable to the British Crown, claimed that inhabitants supplied the British on the way to Brandywine.

[4] Stanley Weintraub, *Iron Tears: America's Battle for Freedom, Britain's Quagmire: 1775-1783* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 115.

[5] Bethany Collins, "[8 Fast Facts About Hessians](#)," *Journal of the American Revolution*, August 19, 2014. Accessed August 31, 2016. They were called Hessians since many of them came from the German state of Hesse-Kassel, and many of them were led by [Baron Wilhelm Von Knyphausen](#).

[6] *Chronicle of America*, 163; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number

152, p. 33. Courtesy of Fold3.com; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 37. Courtesy of Fold3.com; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 41. Courtesy of Fold3.com; *The Annual Register or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1777* (4th Edition, London: J. Dosley, 1794, 127-8; Mark Andrew Tacyn, "'To the End:' The First Maryland Regiment and the American Revolution" (PhD diss., University of Maryland College Park, 1999), 137; [The Winning of Independence, 1777-1783](#), *American Military History* (Washington D.C.: Center for Military History, 1989), 72-73.

[7] John E. Ferling, *Setting the World Abaze: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175-176; O'Shaughnessy, 107. O'Shaughnessy argues that the encampment at Chad's Ford was an "excellent defensive position."

[8] Thomas J. McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign: Brandywine and the Fall of Philadelphia* Vol. I (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), 172-173. Reportedly, some Quakers ignored the dueling armies and went about their daily business but others such as Joseph Townsend did watch the battle and worried about their fate if the British were to be victorious.

[9] Ferling, 175-176; "Journal of Captain William Beatty 1776-1781," *Maryland Historical Magazine* June 1908. Vol. 3, no.2, 109. The British had endured two weeks of horrible weather conditions in their journey from Elkton.

[10] Tacyn, 138; Ferling, 175; O'Shaughnessy, 7, 226, 228.

[11] "[II: From Lieutenant Colonel James Ross, 11 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[III: To Colonel Theodorick Bland, 11 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[IV: From Major General John Sullivan, 11 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[V: From Colonel Theodorick Bland, 11 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[VII: Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hanson Harrison to John Hancock, 11 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[From George Washington to John Hancock, 13 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[To George Washington from Brigadier General Anthony Wayne, 19 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; Scheer, and Rankin, 235.

[12] Tacyn, 138-9; Scheer, and Rankin, 236; McGuire, 184-185, 167, 171, 186, 193, 196, 241.

[13] [The Winning of Independence, 1777-1783](#), *American Military History* (Washington D.C.: Center for Military History, 1989), 72-73; Tacyn, 139; David Ross, [The Hessian Jagerkorps in New York and Pennsylvania, 1776-1777](#), *Journal of the American Revolution*, May 14, 2015. Accessed August 31, 2016. The British and Hessians advanced with minimal casualties.

[14] "Journal of Captain William Beatty 1776-1781," 109-110; Muster Rolls and Other Records of Service of Maryland Troops in the American Revolution *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 18, [189](#),

[310](#), [344](#), [345](#), [363](#), [379](#), [388](#), [519](#). William Beatty would become a captain in April 1778 in the Seventh Maryland Regiment, then in the First Maryland Regiment in early 1781.

[15] Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 49. Courtesy of Fold3.com.

[16] Pension of Jacob Armstrong, Revolutionary War Pensions, National Archives, NARA M804, Record Group 15, pension number S.22090, roll 0075. Courtesy of Fold3.com; “[VII: Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hanson Harrison to John Hancock, 11 September 1777](#),” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016. Jacob served as a substitute for his father, Simon Armstrong.

[17] *The Annual Register*, 128-129.

[18] Ferling, 176.

[19] Weintraub, 118; “[VIII: To John Hancock, 11 September 1777](#),” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 53-53a; “[VIII: To John Hancock, 11 September 1777](#),” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016. This letter was published by order of Congress.

[20] Tacyn, 140; *The Annual Register*, 129-130; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 53-53a; “[VIII: To John Hancock, 11 September 1777](#),” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 287. Courtesy of Fold3.com; “[To George Washington from Brigadier General William Woodford, 2 October 1777](#),” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; Journal and Correspondence of the Council of Maryland, 1781-1784 *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 48, [458](#); Scheer, and Rankin, 240.

[21] Ferling, 177; O’Shaughnessy, 109; Washington thrown back at Brandywine, *Chronicle of America*, 163; Letters from Gen. George Washington, Vol. 5, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_344144\_0001, item number 152, p. 53-53a; “[VIII: To John Hancock, 11 September 1777](#),” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; Petitions Address to Congress, 1775-189, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_419789\_0001, item number 42, p. 159. Courtesy of Fold3.com; Pension of Jacob Ritter (prisoner after battle), Revolutionary War Pensions, National Archives, NARA M804, Record Group 15, pension number S.9080, roll 2052. Courtesy of Fold3.com; John Dwight Kilbourne, *A Short History of the Maryland Line in the Continental Army* (Baltimore: Society of Cincinnati of Maryland, 1992), 14; Howard H. Peckham, *The War for Independence: A*



*Military History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 68-70; Scheer, and Rankin,

239. Washington's letter was later published by order of Congress.

[22] "Journal of Captain William Beatty 1776-1781," 110.

[23] O'Shaughnessy, 109; *The Annual Register*, 129-130; "[To George Washington from Major John Clark, Jr., 12 November 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; Peckham, 70; Scheer, and Rankin, 239.

[24] "Journal of Captain William Beatty 1776-1781," 110; Peckham, 70; McGuire, 209. Claims by Continentals that there were many British casualties may have been explained by British tactics.

[25] "A Further Extract from the Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq; by a Committee of the British House of Commons"; "The Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq; before the House of Commons"; Weintraub, 115; Tacyn, 143; Trevelyan, 249, 275; O'Shaughnessy, 110.

[26] John Adams diary 28, [6 February – 21 November 1777](#) [electronic edition], entries for September 16, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society

[27] "A Further Extract from the Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq; by a Committee of the British House of Commons" ; "[General Orders, 19 October 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[General Orders, 25 September 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016; "[General Orders, 3 January 1778](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016.

[28] Tacyn, 142; Letters from General Officers, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pcc\_4345518\_0001, item number 100, p. 69. Courtesy of Fold3.com.

[29] Tacyn, 141.

[30] Tacyn, 140-141.

[31] Tacyn, 143.

[32] "[General Orders, 19 October 1777](#)," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016.

[33] Pension of Jacob Armstrong; Weintraub, 116-117; O'Shaughnessy, 109; "Journal of Captain William Beatty 1776-1781," 110; Kilbourne, 14.

[34] Pension of Jacob Armstrong; *The Annual Register*, 129-130; Sir George Otto Trevelyan, *The American Revolution: Saratoga and Brandywine, Valley Forge, England and France at War*, Vol. 4 (London: Longmans Greens Co., 1920), 275; O'Shaughnessy, 110; Ross, "[The Hessian Jagerkorps in New York and Pennsylvania, 1776-1777](#)," *Journal of the American Revolution*, May 14, 2015. Accessed August 31, 2016; "Journal of Captain William Beatty 1776-1781," 110-111; Kilbourne, 17,



19. As Beatty recounts, Marylanders were joined by the Maryland militia and were still part of General Sullivan's division.

[35] Trevelyan, 249; O'Shaughnessy, 111; Christopher Hibbert, *George III: A Personal History* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 154-155.

[36] "Journal of Captain William Beatty 1776-1781," 110; Kilbourne, 14.

[37] Journal and Correspondence of the Council of Maryland, April 1, 1778 through October 26, 1779 *Archives of Maryland Online* Vol. 21, [118](#); Kilbourne, 21-22, 24-27, 29-30, 31, 33.

[38] Adam Smith, Chapter VII: Of Colonies, Part Third: Of the advantages which Europe has derived from the Discovery of America, and from that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (ed. Edward Canman, New York: The Modern Library, reprint 1937, originally printed in 1776), 587- 588.

<https://msamaryland400.wordpress.com/2016/09/12/british-masters-of-the-field-the-disaster-at-brandywine/>